



Exposition of Acts 20:17-38

Farewell to Friends

The Revd Gervais Angel, Director of Studies at Trinity College, Bristol

Final Farewell

As far as we know, the church at Ephesus was the one in which Paul spent the longest period of his ministry. When Paul had first wanted to go there, the Lord had told him that he should not go, at least not yet, as he had other plans for Paul. He was first to go over to Europe, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and so it was on his next journey, his third journey, that he actually went to Ephesus, and his ministry there was wonderful. For example: many people there were converted to Christ from being involved in what we would call the occult; they had a bonfire of all the implements, books, *etc.*, which people had used in their craft, and a modern value of those books would be the amazing sum of half a million pounds. The ministry of Paul made such an impact in Ephesus, which was a large centre in Asia Minor with about 300,000 inhabitants, that there was a significant drop in the sales of silver images of the goddess, and the silversmiths were worried and sought to stop the ministry. While I do not covet the opposition that he encountered, I certainly covet his impact because, compared with what happened in Ephesus, we are in a very small thing, at least in our part of the world. Clearly then, this ministry had a tremendous impact, but Paul knew in his heart that the time had come to say goodbye. He sensed that the Spirit had been telling him that this was the end; he knew he had to go to Jerusalem and that he would have a hard time there, and that troubles and imprisonment awaited him. Note that he had not yet experienced that prophetic action of Agabus who bound him (Acts 21:11), and put a girdle round him to show that he would in fact be fettered. That had not yet happened – here in Chapter 20 he simply knew in his heart that imprisonment was God's will for him. But he felt he could not just leave the church like that and as he was travelling on his way to Jerusalem on a special mission, he thought that he would love to see them again. Coastal boats in those days tended to need to put in for repairs, especially on a long journey, and the boat that he was travelling on called in at Miletus for a re-fit. So he sent the message to the church at Ephesus asking the elders to come to Miletus so that he could speak to them. We do not know what could have been in their hearts and minds but they came, and, of course, they had the shock of their lives. It's one thing to say to your chief pastor, 'Yes, of course, we'll let you go off on a missionary tour – that's fine, you have our full support', and no doubt they felt Paul had gone off on a missionary tour and that he would come back again. Maybe they thought when he called for them from Miletus, that they would just receive more input from Paul. And yet it proved to be a time for letting go, which was not easy. Paul knew he had to make the break in such a decisive way that, far from leaving them shattered, he had to leave them confirmed and in a position of strength, not in a position of defeat. We have in this wonderful speech, which is of course very different from the three speeches (Acts 2, 10, 13) that we have seen already,

Paul doing something with the elders. He is going to put the church firmly, clearly, decisively into their hands, and in addition he is going to entrust them and the church to the safest hands available.

Model Minister

But first he wants to affirm his right to expect them to go about their work with the same degree of dedication with which he went about his work when he was with them. This particular aspect of Paul's speech has occasioned a certain amount of scholarly discussion, as of course all these speeches do. How could he be so conceited as to blow his own trumpet so blatantly to these people? Paul no longer seemed like a humble pastor and it has been suggested that someone, probably Luke, had his hero in mind and therefore presented a beautiful picture of Paul as the model missionary, pastor, church-planter and carer – and so he is. For Haenchen, in an excellent article by Jan Lambrecht in 1979, Paul is the *model*. But in order to establish that Paul is the model here, the question we have to resolve is whether he is his own model, or whether he is Luke's model. I find this fascinating because some private study on this suggests to me that the language is Luke's but the thoughts are Paul's. For example, two simple points: a little word that crops up quite often in this speech is the word 'I know', and the word that Paul in his letters and in this speech used for 'I know' is '*oida*' (Greek). But Paul uses also here '*epistamai*' (verse 18), a word found only at 1 Timothy 6:14 in the letters attributed to Paul. This word is common in Acts. Again, when Paul in his speeches talks about 'declaring', he tends to use words like '*katangelo*' (e.g. Acts 3:24). However, this is the only speech in which Paul uses '*diamarturamai*' (3 times) whereas Luke uses it frequently in narrative. Therefore we can deduce that the language is generally Luke's and yet as we go through this speech we can be sure that these are Paul's ideas.

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C.H.Dodd in an analysis in his *Apostolic Preaching* says that as far as the missionary speeches are concerned he accepts that they are of the early church, but that in this speech there are echoes of Paul. C.F.D.Moule on the Christology of Luke in Acts comes to the same conclusion, that Paul's ideas are here and the language is Luke's. One is drawn to the conviction that for some reason or other Paul at this particular point did himself leave them with his own model, which Luke then penned. The model was a very costly one. It was not the model of a conceited man

but of somebody who wanted to ensure that they were under no illusions whatsoever about what it was to be a faithful pastor.

Past example

The first thing that he does is *remind them of the past* (v. 18): 'You remember from the first day when I came to Asia, how I was with you all the time, being a slave to the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I held nothing back for the things that were to your advantage, to declare to you and to teach to you publicly and from house to house, witnessing to the Jews and to the Greeks repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ'. Paul is reminding them that he was a constant example in that he was with them all the time doing these things. It is difficult for us to accept that a man who *declares himself* to be humble is in fact humble. But Paul qualifies his declaration with the words 'tears and trials which came to me from the Jews' plots'. These were the plots of his own kinsmen, and tears do not come easily to many men. Admittedly some men are more emotional than others. I have seen tears recently – tears of homesickness, and also of remorse. You can have tears of helplessness in a situation of great sadness and pain. But there are tears in ministry which do not come from sentiment, homesickness or remorse; they are tears of sheer desperation. These will spring up when you see in ministry a person whom you know to need help from you and you feel that you are failing; that is humility. Paul's tears stemmed from that and he had an uncompromising witness, whether on the platform, or doing personal work, whether he was talking to the Jews who would have found the message difficult or whether he was talking to the Greeks who might have felt it to be relatively easy because they believed in many gods anyway so another new one was not very much different. The message was always the same: repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 21).

Paul reminds them of the past and then he goes on to tell them about *the present*. He does this in a very simple way, by using the word 'now' (v. 22 and v. 25). He says he is going to Jerusalem and is 'bound' (but not handcuffed) by the Spirit. He says he does not know what is going to happen but that the Spirit is telling him that imprisonments and troubles await him. He feels that he has no option other than to go to Jerusalem. If we recall the circumstances of his journey to Ephesus, we will note that he had tried earlier to go to Ephesus but the Spirit had prevented him, similarly with Bithynia, and instead he had been called to help in Macedonia, and it was some years before that desire of his to go to Ephesus was fulfilled. He had learned, as Abraham had done before him, that God knew best. Abraham had twice tried to save himself, firstly by passing his wife off as his sister, and then, having asked God for a child, he was too impatient to wait, thus defying God's ways (Gen. 15 to 22). Abraham had ignored God's commandments earlier in his life but when he was asked to offer up Isaac he acknowledged him. In the same way Paul has learned that when he hears the voice, as he does here, that it is the best one to listen to. He says that he is bound by the Spirit and when the Spirit tells him, he must go. One can imagine the elders' concern on his behalf when he says that he does not think his life is worth more than his ministry. I have to confess that I wish I could feel as he did; the economic constraints on my own personal judgment are considerable. We

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The Collection

The ministry he had been given (v. 24) was to bear witness to the gospel of the grace of God. Returning to critical study, one of the reasons scholars have believed that Luke made this speech up was because there is no reference in this speech to Paul going to Jerusalem to offer the collection to the saints, which according to Romans he was engaged in at this point in time. If you look at Romans 15, you will find that at the point at which he was writing the letter (probably in Greece) he was taking up an offering from the churches in Macedonia and Greece and was going to take it to Jerusalem to the saints. We also learn in 2 Corinthians 8–9 about this offering. Yet although Luke tells us in Acts about Paul going to Jerusalem he never mentions the collection. Critics therefore say that if this collection is so important in the life of Paul as it obviously is in Romans 15, then why does it not appear in the text here? In fact it does appear in this very phrase: 'to bear witness to the gospel of the grace of God, to finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus'. At 2 Corinthians 8–9, we find a description of this offering to the saints, and words which Paul uses for the offering include 'ministry' and 'grace' (8:5, 9:12). The principle of that offering was that it was testimony to the gospel to demonstrate to those in Jerusalem that the gospel was, in fact, bearing fruit outside their own territory. I believe wholeheartedly that what Paul is saying here is that he has to finish his course and testify to the saints at Jerusalem, by taking the money, that the gospel of grace was being accomplished there. This is the ministry he has in hand at this point.

Ministerial Innocence

Another point about his present is this, one which cynics find difficult to believe that Paul said; he says he does not owe any of them anything; that he is innocent of the blood of every one of them. He is bidding them farewell with an easy conscience about his ministry to them. In v. 25 he says they will not see him any more because he was witnessing to them that day that he was 'clean from the blood of all'. It would be wonderful if one could spend the whole of one's ministry in that frame of mind because it is the one which God intends. God wants us to experience deep within our soul the fact that he accepts us for Christ's sake and that there is no sin, whether it is of commission or omission, which he will not and does not forgive for Christ's sake. Part of the force of the gospel is that we live guilt-free lives, not in the sense that we have never done anything wrong, but that whatever we have done wrong is covered by God – and that is

MINISTRY

precisely what Paul is pointing out. But, having said that, when we live a life of clear conscience we must not fall short of doing those things that are within our capability. 'When we have done everything we are but unprofitable servants', but the emphasis is on the word 'everything'. Paul is demonstrating to them very clear reasons why he can say that he is 'clear of the blood of every one of you', because he has been engaged in this constant, tearful ministry, both in public and in private, with the Jews and with the Greeks, giving the whole of himself all of the time.

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He has never held back. He says he has declared to them the 'whole counsel of God'. I believe that this is something which is misunderstood by evangelicals, a rare admission for me! I normally find this statement being interpreted in this way - 'I have preached the Bible from Genesis to Revelation'. This word 'counsel' only appears twice in Paul, once in Ephesians with 'plan of salvation' (Ephes. 1:11), and the other one 'for the desires or the wills of men's hearts' (1 Cor. 4:5). But Luke uses it more, it appears in the Pentecost speech where, we are told, it was God's determined counsel that the Jewish leaders should have killed Jesus (Acts 2:23). If we are going to follow the language through consistently, we will find the 'whole counsel of God' is not imparted by a preaching programme which will take five years for a church to do, it is, in fact, what God has done in the saving death and the mighty resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wherever Paul has gone, whoever he has met, he has not held back on the full message of that salvation, repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask you now - where do you stand? I ask myself - where do I stand in relation to him? Occasional preaching, regular preaching, talks to groups young and old - are you sometimes at a loss for a theme, or are you tinged with the same burden that Richard Baxter had, 'I'll preach as though I ne'er shall preach again, and as a dying man to dying men'.



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